

The Threat, 1964

By Dr. Boyd L. Dastrup

Insurgency is not a “new” type of warfare to the US Military. Some of the techniques and theories used by insurgents today in the War on Terrorism are similar to those employed by the Vietcong to fight and defeat the greater numbered and better armed and trained American forces in Vietnam.

In September 1950, President Harry S. Truman dispatched the US Military Assistance Advisory Group (MAAG) to Saigon, South Vietnam, to supervise the French use of \$10 million worth of American military weapons and equipment in their fight against the Viet Minh insurgents. This initial, small effort grew from providing a limited number of military advisers to build and train a South Vietnamese army in the 1950s to the commitment of American combat troops in the 1960s.

Following the French withdrawal from Vietnam in 1956, the Americans picked up all major military responsibilities in South Vietnam. Initially, MAAG advisers found the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) in a sorry state and set out to whip it into shape. Encountering a language and cultural barrier which complicated training, advisory teams assisted the Vietnamese commander and his staff. While the officers furnished guidance on all matters concerning unit effectiveness, the NCOs concentrated on planning, organizing, supervising and training the units.

Apprehensive of a North Vietnamese invasion along the lines of the North Korean invasion of South Korea in 1950, the teams trained ARVN to fight on a conventional battlefield with large armored, mechanized and field artillery formations. This would give it the ability to defeat an invasion by the People's Army of Vietnam (PAVN), also called the North Vietnamese Army (NVA), but poorly prepared ARVN for the pervasive guerrilla war in South Vietnam in the 1950s and early 1960s.¹

The Enemy. As the US was developing a conventional South Vietnamese army, the Communists intensified their effort



A US Soldier acts as a Tactical Advisor to the South Vietnam conventional forces. (Photo courtesy of the US Army Center of Military History)

to unify Vietnam under their control through a well-coordinated insurgency. Formed on 20 December 1960, as a political front for the liberation of South Vietnam, the National Liberation Front (NLF), composed of Viet Minh, Communists, nationalists, socialists and others interested in overthrowing Ngo Dinh Diem's South Vietnamese government, and the People's Liberation Armed Front (PLAF), organized on 15 February 1961, to direct the military effort and commonly called Vietcong by the Americans, represented the southern wing of the Vietnamese revolutionary nationalist movement, while the northern wing resided in Hanoi, North Vietnam.

The Vietcong consisted of main or regular forces that were well-trained, professional, disciplined, and thoroughly politically indoctrinated and were stationed in secret bases and secure areas; regional forces of guerrillas who operated at the district level; and local irregular forces who were farmers by day, indistinguishable from other villagers and farmers, and terrorists by night. Regardless of their organization, Vietcong military forces complemented the NVA which was a well-trained, highly motivated and battle experienced combat force.

The Method. The NVA and Vietcong, both of which were primarily light infantry, generally depended upon mortars and rockets for fire support until 1966 when they started employing Soviet and captured American field artillery. The local Vietcong terrorists set the booby traps, conducted night raids, served as

recruiters for the cause, kidnapped and murdered South Vietnamese pacification workers and exploded bombs in Saigon to demonstrate the inability of the South Vietnamese government to provide basic security.²

Dedicated to the cause of overthrowing colonialism in all its forms in Vietnam and driving the Americans out, the Vietcong with support from Hanoi devised a strategy of armed violence and political action early in the 1960s to overthrow the South Vietnamese government which they viewed to be illegitimate. While NLF political leaders employed propaganda to win support from the people and simultaneously turn world and especially American public opinion against the American intervention, Vietcong military forces assassinated South Vietnamese government officials, intimidated the peasants through violence and overran ARVN outposts or ambushed small units, capturing ARVN weapons in the process.³

Initiative. By 1963, the Vietcong had taken the initiative—even with the influx of American military personnel complete with their sophisticated weapons and helicopters that gave ARVN and the Americans the ability to strike quickly at any time and furnished them with the apparent advantage. Vietcong military forces quickly neutralized the helicopters. Sometimes, they stood and fought and employed small arms fire to knock helicopters out of the sky. On other occasions, they waited for the helicopters to land and then ambushed the landing force.



US Soldiers train combat skills to the South Vietnamese conventional forces. (Photo courtesy of the US Army Center of Military History)

The Battle of Ap Bac in January 1963, demonstrated the tenacity of the Vietcong military forces where they defeated a numerically superior ARVN force, disabled five American helicopters and suffered only light casualties. This decisive victory emboldened the Vietcong and Hanoi to intensify their insurgency in the South.⁴

The assassination of Diem in November 1963, provided the Vietcong and Hanoi with the opportune time to step up the insurgency. During the confusion that followed the assassination, political cadres infiltrated the strategic hamlets (designed by Diem to separate the peasants from the Vietcong) to turn them against the South Vietnamese government, while military forces inflicted heavy losses on ARVN. Demonstrating boldness, Vietcong forces even attacked a US Special Forces camp, Hiep Hoa, about 50 miles from Saigon in November 1963. They captured four Americans and a large stock of weapons and established a check point along Route One where they brazenly collected tolls, seized cargoes and cannibalized vehicles.⁵

As it infiltrated NVA regulars along the Ho Chi Minh trail into South Vietnam to supply the Vietcong and assist the growing insurgency, Hanoi decided late in 1964 to move forward with a general offensive paralleled by popular uprisings in the cities to topple the South Vietnamese government.

Late in 1965, Hanoi prepared to launch a strike to divide South Vietnam into two parts along the Pleiku-An Khe-Quinhon axis using the Chu Pong massive as a base of operations with subsidiary offensives north and south of the main thrust. Before the offensive could get off the ground, the 1st Cavalry (Airmobile) attacked into the Ia Drang Valley at the base of the Chu Pong. This led to the Battle of Landing Zone X-Ray from 14 to 18 November 1965

where the 2nd Squadron, Fifth Cavalry (2-5 Cav), 2-7 Cav and 1-7 Cav fought three tenacious NVA regiments.⁶

Weapons and Tactics. The overwhelming American firepower from field artillery from nearby firebases convinced Vo Nyugen Giap, the NVA commander, of the futility of fighting the Americans on the open battlefield and caused the NVA and Vietcong to henceforth reemphasize security, silence and speed to avoid annihilation. Using detailed plans and repeated rehearsals, they rejected battles of attrition along the lines of Landing Zone X-Ray for ambushes and hit-and-run strikes. NVA and Vietcong forces speedily attacked their objective, quickly withdrew, and depended upon mortars and rockets for fire support.

Rockets and mortars fit well with rapid movements and hit-and-run tactics because they were light and could be emplaced and displaced rapidly. Generally, NVA or Vietcong forces fired just a few rounds, quickly picked up their weapons and moved to another site often before the Americans could locate them for counterfire. Moreover, the rockets which were the primary artillery weapon of the NVA and Vietcong had low trajectories that were difficult to detect with the AN/TPQ-4 radar, making them virtually invisible. To defeat the rocket and mortar threat, the Americans turned to aerial observers. They located rockets and mortars by following their exhaust trails to pinpoint firing positions.⁷

Sappers complemented NVA and Vietcong mortar, rocket and infantry forces. Depending upon secrecy and stealth, they served as the lead element in assaults on a fixed installation or a military field position, such as a firebase. Armed with explosive devises, they breached the outer defenses and neutralized tactical and strategic positions to prepare the way for the main attack. Often, they disguised their attacks with mortars fired by infantry and then took advantage of the diversion to assault the center of the firebase while the defenders deployed to their bunkers seeking safety.⁸

Equally as frustrating to the Americans and ARVN, Vietcong forces mingled freely with the civilian population for cover, blended in with the civilians and attacked enemy ground forces or the local populace at the times and places of their choosing. Because of the difficulties of distinguishing between the Vietcong and the civilian population, ARVN soldiers and American Soldiers and Marines were constantly under threat from an unseen enemy

and lived with restrictive fire engagement rules to prevent shooting civilians.⁹

As this suggested, the American military encountered an adaptive enemy in Vietnam. To nullify American firepower, the NVA and Vietcong relied upon ambushes, hit-and-run strikes, terrorist attacks, generally avoided a pitched battle unless they were cornered, and freely used the civilian population for cover to discourage counterattacks. Such tactics frustrated the Americans who wanted to fight the enemy on the open battlefield where their superior firepower could make a difference in the outcome of the battle and discovered the enemy to be determined, relentless and dedicated.

Endnotes:

1. Captain Leslie A. Belknap, "The Unsung Heroes: Redleg Advisory Efforts in Vietnam, 1965-1969," *Field Artillery*, April 1991, 14-17; Major General David E. Ott, *Field Artillery*, 22-37, 239; Ronald H. Spector, *Advice and Support: The Early Years*, The U.S. Army in Vietnam (Washington, D.C.: Center of Military History, U.S. Army, 1983), 103-104.
2. Spector, *Advice and Support*, 275-343; Ott, *Field Artillery*, 9-10; George D. Moss, *Vietnam: An American Ordeal* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Prentice Hall, 2006), 104, 241; John A. Nagl, "The Failure of Counterinsurgency Warfare," in Robert J. McMahon, *Major Problems in the History of the Vietnam War* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2008), 220-34.
3. Moss, *Vietnam*, 128-31, 205, 206; Robert K. Brigham, "The Role and Significance of the National Liberation Front," in McMahon, *Major Problems in the History of the Vietnam War*, 304-13.
4. Moss, *Vietnam*, 128-31; George C. Herring, *America's Longest War: The United States and Vietnam, 1950-1975* (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1979), 87-88.
5. Herring, *America's Longest War*, 110.
6. Moss, *Vietnam*, 158, 159, 209-15, 456-57.
7. Ott, *Field Artillery*, 10-13; Nagl, "The Failure of Counterinsurgency Warfare," 220-34.
8. Ott, *Field Artillery*, 7-20.
9. Herring, *America's Longest War*, 88.

Dr. Boyd L. Dastrup is the Field Artillery Historian for the US Army Fires Center of Excellence and Fort Sill, Oklahoma. He has written *The US Army Command and General Staff College: A Centennial History*; *Crusade in Nuremberg: Military Occupation, 1945-1949*; *King of Battle: A Branch History of the US Army's Field Artillery*; *Modernizing the King of Battle: 1973-1991*; *The Field Artillery: History and Sourcebook*; and *Operation Desert Storm and Beyond: Modernizing the Field Artillery in the 1990s*. He also has written articles in *A Guide to the Sources of United States Military History*, *The Oxford Companion to American Military History*, and *Professional Military Education in the United States: A Historical Dictionary* and served as a subject matter expert for the History Channel on "Dangerous Missions: Forward Observation" (2001) and the Military History Channel in "Artillery Strikes" (2005) and "Weaponology: Artillery" (2006). He has a Ph.D. in US Military History from Kansas State University.